

NORTH PACIFIC HUMPBACK WHALE

Koholā

Did you know...

...while in Hawai'i, humpbacks all sing the same song, which changes over the season.

...the scientific name for humpbacks, *Megaptera novaeangliae*, means "great wings of New England."



Photo courtesy Lori Mazzuca ©1997

Population trends

The humpback whale is an endangered species. Scientists estimate that the pre-whaling population of the North Pacific stock of humpback whales was approximately 15,000 whales. Researchers estimate there are currently about 7,000 humpback whales in the North Pacific. Out of this stock, approximately 5,000 humpbacks migrate to Hawai'i each year.

Distribution & Movement Patterns

The North Pacific stock of humpback whales winter in three nearshore lower latitude mating and calving areas: Hawai'i, western Mexico, and the islands of southern Japan. During the spring and summer, the North Pacific stock of humpback whales migrate to feeding areas over the continental shelf of the Pacific rim, from the coast of California north to the Bering Sea. The main Hawaiian Islands may contain the largest seasonal population of North Pacific humpbacks in the world. Hawai'i is the only state in the United States where humpback whales mate, calve, and nurse their young.

Feeding patterns

The North Pacific stock of humpback whales feed during the summer, in northern waters (between approximate latitudes 40° to 75°). They feed on krill and small schooling fish, such as capelin and herring. Humpbacks rarely feed in their wintering areas; it is not known if they feed along their migratory routes.

Humpback whales are an endangered species, protected by the Endangered Species Act, the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and Hawai'i state law.

In Hawai'i, it is illegal to approach a humpback whale closer than 100 yards by sea, and 1,000 feet by air.

Report any suspected violations to the NOAA Fisheries Enforcement Hotline at (800) 853-1964.

Natural History

Mature females typically calve every 2-3 years. The humpback whale's gestation period is 10-12 months. Calves nurse for 10-12 months, often doubling in size during their first year. Humpback whales of both sexes typically reach sexual maturity between 5-9 years of age. The humpback whale's average lifespan is unknown, but is believed to be 40 - 60 years.

Threats

Acoustic disturbance
Collision with ships
Entanglement in marine debris
Habitat degradation, including pollution
Illegal whaling

Recovery efforts

The Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary seeks to educate the public about humpback whales and the importance of Hawai'i's waters to the humpbacks' survival. The Sanctuary also supports humpback whale research efforts in Hawai'i.

Research

Current research includes:
population assessments;
documenting and analyzing social and reproductive behavior; and,
describing the natural history of humpback whales.

Research methods include:
aerial and vessel surveys;
underwater photography and acoustic recording;
photo-identification of flukes; and
satellite tagging.

Sponsored by the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary with assistance from the NOAA Fisheries Office of Enforcement and the NOAA Fisheries Pacific Islands Area Office
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